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Strange Parallel

By Ed Koterba



QUIETLY, Douglas R. Stringfellow, former United States congressman, talked about how his life had changed in the five years since he pulled a hoax on the national public.

He was talking over the long-distance telephone from Salt Lake City. Mr. Stringfellow is now a radio newscaster under the name of Don Douglas.

The year 1954 was to him what the year 1959 was to another young man caught in the web of a big hoax. I got to thinking about the former congressman after the TV quiz scandal hearings, and there emerged a strange parallel between Douglas Stringfellow and Charles Van Doren.

Doug Stringfellow was just a few months from Mr. Van Doren's age of 33 when the world crumbled around him after he confessed that he was not, after all, the OSS war hero he had made out he was, and that he never did accomplish such World War II feats as parachuting behind enemy lines to capture a high-ranking Nazi.

Like Mr. Van Doren, Doug Stringfellow was endowed with great personality, native intelligence and a fine family background. As in Mr. Van Doren's case, Mr. Stringfellow's hoax started with just a little lie.

The little white lie went over well with a few friends, and the congressman embellished on it. The lie grew and grew. Wire services played the story big. He was hailed on "This Is Your Life," and he played his part well.

Soon there was no turning back—until the thing became a nightmare, just as in Charley Van Doren's case. And his confession came in a gush, dramatically, just like Charley Van Doren's. He appeared on a hastily called TV program and as humbly as Mr. Van Doren was to do it five years later, he begged for forgiveness.

What had happened to Douglas R. Stringfellow after five years? Did the public forgive?

"The public never forgets," he said. He was not bitter. "I still have my friends, and I still have my enemies." Words piled out as if they'd been stopped up by emotion for five years.

After the bottom fell out, there were a lot of times, he said, when he didn't know where his next meal was coming from. He lectured some, and he painted, and then he went back to his old routine of broadcasting.

That personal explosion in 1954, he said, made him a better man within himself. "It took that," he said, "to make me a human being." He is putting his whole story into a book which is ready for the publishers, "Chaff Before the Wind."

I had one final question: Would the public forgive Charles Van Doren? There was a pause on the other end of the line.

Then, fervently, former Congressman Douglas Stringfellow said: "I hope so."

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